

# **Active Listening**

**By John Chancellor**

Active listening is listening purposefully with your focus on understanding what the speaker is trying to communicate. We are rarely trained to listen actively. Even those who know how to listen actively generally do not listen actively all the time. It takes effort to listen actively. It is easy to fall back into the habit of listening passively - that is hearing the words but not really striving to understand the meaning the speaker is trying to get across.

## **Our Normal Mode of Listening**

It is rather unfortunate but in today's busy, hurried society we rarely give our full attention to any task. We have become fixated on the concept of multi-tasking. We think we can listen and do other task at the same time.

When listening, we are often distracted by the events going on around us. We also are generally thinking about our response to what is being said instead of fully concentrating on the meaning of the words the speaker is saying. We fail to maintain eye contact - showing that we are diverting our attention to something else. In short we are not fully engaged in the conversation.

Often we do not allow a person to complete their thought before we interrupt with our own thoughts and comments. At times we even finish their sentences for them. We are not listening so much as listening for our time to show what we think or know about the subject.

Talking on the phone requires even greater concentration to be an active listener. How many times have you been talking to someone on the phone and you heard the clicking of the keyboard? Or you are talking but realize that the person is not fully there. How does that make you feel? That something or someone else is more important than what you are saying.

## **Techniques for Active Listening**

One of the more common goals of actively listening is to ensure that the listener accurately understands what the speaker has said by replying back to the speaker and paraphrasing what they believe they have just heard ("So, if I understood you correctly..."). The speaker can either acknowledge that the listener's understanding was accurate or can quickly identify any misunderstanding that the listener may have. Actively listening helps the listener avoid incorrect conclusions due to unintentional assumptions that the listener may have made. It's important to note that a listener that employs active listening is not necessarily agreeing with the speaker.

Another goal of actively listening is for the listener to extract additional information from the speaker. While listening to the speaker, the listener may notice something in the speaker's tone or body language. By responding to the speaker with phrases such as "you seem to feel ..." the speaker has the opportunity to confirm or correct the listener's understanding. This is a non-confrontational approach to asking follow-up questions which clarify the speaker's intent.

- When you are listening to someone, either in a one-on-one conversation or as a member of a group, focus your attention fully on the subject the speaker is talking about. Do not let your mind wander to any of the distractions that try to creep into your mind.
- Avoid distractions. Keep your attention focused on the speaker and what they are saying. Often when talking with someone we can become distracted by activities going on around us. When dining, we often divert our attention to someone walking by, what someone at the next table is saying or some other activity. It is so easy to be distracted but when your attention is focused elsewhere you cannot listen attentively.
- Focus on the speaker, not yourself. Do not let yourself be thinking about your response. Maintain eye contact. It is not necessary to have eye contact all the time but do not be looking around the room at other things.
- Be actively involved. Let your body language indicate that you are listening. That can be a nod of the head or any other gesture that comes natural when you are totally focused on the conversation.
- Always give the speaker time to finish their sentence before you jump in. Form the habit of silently counting 1 - 2 - 3 before you join in. Make sure the speaker is not just catching their breath.
- Learn to ask questions in a manner that is non-threatening. If you ask questions in a threatening manner, the other person becomes defensive and the conversation soon degenerates into an argument rather than an exchange of ideas.

## **Benefits of Active Listening**

There are several benefits to be gained by listening actively.

The first is that you will truly be communicating. If both parties to a conversation engage in active listening, then each person will understand the other person and their position. Good communication is the basis for good relationship. You cannot have good communication without active listening.

When you listen actively, you are honoring the other person. This builds trust with them. Listening attentively gets people to open up. They feel like they are being heard and understood. Once they feel like someone is really listening to them, they are more willing to share their true feelings.

When we listen attentively, we can fully understand the other person's point of view. While we might not always agree with their point of view, at least we "know where they are coming from". This often avoids conflict. Just knowing what a person is really thinking and where they are coming from helps to better understand them.

If you want to improve your relationships - at home, at work and in your social networks - learn to listen actively. It will improve all aspects of your life.

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